

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for determining properties of a sample surface using an atomic force microscope, comprising:

5 applying a first voltage between the sample and a probe;

moving the probe towards the surface of the sample;

stopping movement of the probe towards the surface of the sample when current in the probe is initially detected;
10 and

applying a magnetic field to the probe such that the probe obtains stable contact with the surface of the sample.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the magnetic field

15 is applied by a magnetic coil.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein the probe is moved towards the sample by a piezoelectric scanner.

20 4. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

converting the current in the probe to a second voltage.

5. The method of claim 4, further comprising:

amplifying the second voltage; and
generating an image representative of a sample surface
property based on the amplified second voltage.

5 6. The method of claim 1, wherein the magnetic field
is applied to the probe after the movement of the probe
towards the sample surface is stopped.

10 7. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
oscillating the magnetic field applied to the probe.

8. The method of claim 7, wherein the probe is
oscillated with an amplitude of 200 Oe and a frequency of 5
Hz for a duration of 2 cycles.

15 9. An atomic force microscope that determines
characteristics of a surface of a specimen, comprising:
means for applying a first voltage between the sample
and the probe;

20 means for moving the probe towards the surface of the
sample;

means for stopping movement of the probe towards the
surface of the sample when current in the probe is initially
detected; and

means for applying a magnetic field to the probe such that the probe obtains stable contact with the surface of the sample.

5 10. The atomic force microscope of claim 9, wherein the means for applying a magnetic field is a magnetic coil.

10 11. The atomic force microscope of claim 9, wherein the means for moving the probe towards the sample is a piezoelectric scanner.

12. The atomic force microscope of claim 9, further comprising:

15 means for converting the current in the probe to a second voltage.

13. The atomic force microscope of claim 12, further comprising:

20 means for amplifying the second voltage; and
 means for generating an image representative of a sample surface property based on the amplified second voltage.

14. The atomic force microscope of claim 9, wherein
the means for applying a magnetic field applies a magnetic
field to the probe after the means for stopping movement of
the probe stops movement of the probe towards the sample
5 surface.

15. The atomic force microscope of claim 9, further
comprising:

10 means for oscillating the magnetic field applied to the
probe.

15 16. The atomic force microscope of claim 15, wherein
the means for oscillating the probe oscillates the probe
with an amplitude of 200 Oe and a frequency of 5 Hz for a
duration of 2 cycles.

20 17. The atomic force microscope of claim 9, further
comprising a means for supporting the sample, the means for
applying a magnetic field being disposed on the means for
supporting the sample.